





# Fetch

A Novelette

By Mazy Morris



**NOTE: BY CELIA KINSEY WRITING AS MAZY MORRIS.**

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## Springtime

**I just stared** at him. That's what you do when you're so shocked that you open your mouth and close it again because no words are coming out.

"Are you sure you're OK?" Mike asked.

Five minutes ago, I'd been OK. Now, I wasn't so sure.

Mike had started out with that dreaded phrase, "Cynthia, we need to talk," while sitting on the edge of my desk.

How come no man ever needs to talk about how much he loves me, and how he can't imagine spending the rest of his life without me?

Needless to say, that's not the direction my conversation with Mike was going.

"Sure," I said. "I'm listening."

"Let's talk in there." Mike angled his head in the direction of his office door. I, like the rest of the shlubs, have to make do with a cubicle, but Mike's the boss, so he gets an office with a door that shuts.

I should have started worrying when Mike wanted to talk to me behind closed doors, but I didn't. I figured it had something to do with our plans for the weekend, and since nobody at work is supposed to know we're even together, we never talk relationship stuff at the office. Mike was supposed to be going upstate with me that weekend, to visit my parents. My parents love Mike.

Mike shut the office door behind me and got right to the point.

"Cynthia, you're a great girl."

That should have tipped me off, but it didn't. I think I mumbled, "Thanks," or something, and he kept right on going.

"The truth is, you are too good for me."

"I wouldn't say that."

"The truth is, I'm not ready for the kind of relationship you deserve."

That was when I finally caught on that things were about to go terribly wrong. People never use the phrase, "the truth is," twice in succession unless they have something big to hide.

"I don't think I have what it takes to make you happy. I've tried. I really have." That statement would have been more convincing if he hadn't been checking his phone under the desk while he said it.

"What are you trying to say?" I had a pretty good idea what he was working up to, but I wished he'd just get on with it.

"I don't think we should see each other, anymore." Mike was looking down. I don't think it was shame. I think he was texting.

It was at that point that I opened my mouth to reply and nothing came out.

"Are you sure you're OK?" Mike finally looked up.

I didn't say anything. I just got up and left. I stopped at my desk to get my purse and headed straight to the elevator without turning off my computer, or filing my invoices, or saying goodbye to anyone. I left in such a hurry that I even forgot my jacket. It didn't matter. It was a warm April day.

Spring is my favorite season. Normally, I find it impossible to be unhappy in the springtime. I love everything about the season: the blossoming trees, the warm breeze, the rain storms. I guess I'm kind of a romantic. I might want to rethink that. Apparently, being a romantic is the first qualification for getting dumped on a regular basis.

I headed for the park. I needed to think. Mike and I had been together for almost a year. We'd even talked about getting married. Well—I had talked about getting married. Looking back on it, Mike had been less than enthusiastic. Still. He never balked at spending time with my family, so I figured our relationship must be moving forward. I couldn't have been more wrong.



What makes it worse is that my sister Ann is getting married in June. To a senator. He's a decade older than she is, but that doesn't seem to bother anyone. He's old money. My mother couldn't be more pleased.

Ann calls me up four or five times a week—to keep me posted on her wedding plan. She's having a big do. Enormous white dress. Twelve Bride's maids. Sit down dinner. Marque on the lawn of an estate belonging to friends of the family.

I'm the maid of honor, of course. I encouraged Ann to ask one of her friends to do it, but she said she'd already considered that, and it would just cause hurt feelings if she chose one over the others. So much for her choosing me because I'm her favorite.

**When I got to the park,** I just walked around, up and down my favorite paths. I must have walked for miles. That's when it came to me. My big idea.

I didn't want to go back to work in a stuffy old office. I certainly didn't want to go back to work in a stuffy old office that housed a man who didn't love me—probably never had loved me. What I wanted to do was stay outside in the sunshine all day long.

I toyed with the idea of becoming an ice cream vendor. Forget that. I'd eat up all my inventory. I considered even more briefly becoming a mime, but I have a clown phobia and mimes fall in that general category, as far as I'm concerned. Unless I was prepared to get hired on with the sanitation department, I was going to have to think of something else.

Then I saw her. My inspiration for a total life-change. She had a big smile on her face. She was looking up into the sun and walking fast. She had to. She had a leash in each hand and at the end of each leash was a Lab. One black. One chocolate.

"Excuse me," I said. She looked startled. Nobody talks to anybody else in Central Park, not unless the person initiating the conversation is asking for "spare change," or seeking to inform the unsuspecting on the subject of an impending worldwide apocalypse.

She just looked at me.

"Are you a professional dog walker?" I asked.

"Yes." She was looking at me a little less like she was afraid I was going to ask her for subway fare, or if she was aware of the fact that the current mayoral administration was building a secret listening center under the New York City Central Library, and the only way to stop them from intercepting our thought-waves was to line our hats with tin-foil.

"How long have you been a dog walker?" I asked her.

"About six years. Are you looking for someone to walk your dog?" She was sizing me up. I suppose she was wondering what kind of responsible dog owner goes out for a walk on a sunny spring day and leaves their dog at home.

"I don't have a dog," I said. "But I like dogs—I'm thinking of becoming one."

"A dog or a dog walker?" She asked.

Clearly, she was still toying with the idea that I was a crazy woman. Probably, the fact that I'd spent a good portion of the last hour crying, and my mascara was streaked down my face, didn't help.

"I'm interested in becoming a dog walker. I'm really very normal. It's just that I got dumped a couple of hours ago, and my ex is my boss, and I thought—"

The woman was looking less skeptical. Evidently, I was convincing as someone who'd recently been dumped. As many times as I've heard, "It's not you, it's me," I should be an expert at it by now.

"My name is Barbara," the woman said. "I'd shake your hand, but I'm kind of occupied."

The Labs had been contentedly sniffing around the pavement, but they were starting to get restive. I told her I was Cynthia, and I was pleased to meet her. I patted one of the Labs on the head, but he was more interested in a bit of hotdog someone had dropped than he was in me.

"Are you serious about the dog-walking thing?" Barbara asked.



“Absolutely.”

“I might be able to get you started,” Barbara said. “I already have a couple of potential clients I can’t accommodate, and my daughter’s due to have a baby any day now, so I’m going to need someone to fill in for me.”

“Really?” This was too easy.

“I’ll give you my number.”

When I got home, I called Molly. Molly is my best friend. She’s also the sister of Jack. Jack is seven boyfriends ago, which equates to roughly 7 years. I have an average. I’m very consistent that way.

Molly arrived twenty minutes later with a tub of cookie-dough ice cream and a shoulder to cry on. I took the ice cream, but I was all cried out, so Molly sat on the edge of my bed and said vile things about Mike while I drafted my letter of resignation.

I wasn’t going back to that office. Ever. Not even to get my jacket. That jacket had never been a favorite of mine, anyway. Purple never was my color.

Molly was aghast when I told her I was quitting my job, effective immediately.

“What are you going to do for money?” She asked.

I’m very frugal. I have ten months’ worth of rent-money saved up, but I didn’t dare tell Molly that, or she’d have me out the door and on my way to the mall in ten minutes. Molly thinks I don’t spend enough on myself.

“I’ve decided I’m going to become a dog walker,” I said.

“A what!?” Molly slide off the bed so fast the tub of ice cream she’d taken from me when I fired up my laptop fell on the floor and rolled under the bed.

“A dog walker.”

“Can you really make a living at that?”

I hadn’t done any research on that aspect of things, but I wasn’t about to admit that to Molly. Suddenly deciding to switch careers—if you can call being a junior book-keeper a career—is very out of character for me. I decided I’d better cover my tracks if I didn’t want Molly freaking out on me. When Molly freaks out on me, she always suggests that I should get back together with her brother. That is **not** going to happen. Jack made that quite clear. I wish he’d make it equally clear to Molly.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while,” I lied.

“Really?”

“Sure,” I said. “This is New York City. Best place in the world to launch a career as a dog walker.”

By the next morning, I wasn’t feeling so confident. I’d called Barbara, and she’d agreed to meet me for lunch. I guess lunch was her last-ditch effort to make completely sure she wasn’t fobbing off a lunatic on her potential clients.

She was nice enough. She asked me lots of questions about my work history and my experience with animals. My work history was pretty solid, but I didn’t really know that much about dogs. That didn’t seem to bother Barbara. I guess she figured if I admitted to my lack of expertise it must be an indication of my honesty. By the time we got to through our sandwiches, Barbara had moved on from interviewing me to what she described as Dog Walking 101.

She was in the middle of outlining what to do if a dog does his business in the middle of a crowded sidewalk when my phone rang. I should have turned it off. I know that now.

“Do you need to get that?” Barbara said.

I looked at the screen. It was Mike. He must have finally gotten around to reading his email. I’d been wondering if he’d bother to call.

“Not important,” I said. “I’ll call him back later.”

My face must have looked funny though, because Barbara didn’t immediately return to Dog Walking 101.

“Your exe?”



"Yes."

"You're really sure you want to quit your day job? You won't be making much until you build up a good client-base."

"I'll be fine."

I could tell that Barbara wanted to ask questions, but instead she moved on to the importance of keeping dogs hydrated during hot weather. She also gave me my first assignment. I'd be walking a Great Dane named Wally, every morning at nine. He lived not far from me. Belonged to an artist, Barbara said.

When I was done with Barbara, I called Mike back. I figured I owed him that much. He was—at least up until yesterday—my boss, and I might need a reference from him someday, if the dog walking thing didn't pan out.

"I've been so worried about you," Mike said.

That was news to me. If anyone in this relationship had ever qualified as a worrier, that person was definitely me. Unfortunately, during our ill-fated romance, I had worried about all the wrong things. I had worried that Mike would get hit by a cab while crossing the street, or that he'd contract some dread disease while using a public toilet, or that he'd be mugged in an elevator. It had never occurred to me to worry that he did not—and never was—going to love me.

"I'm fine," I said. Too brightly. "No need to worry about me. I've already found a new job."

"Really? That was quick."

"Yes." It was about then that I realized I really shouldn't have brought that up. I didn't think he'd be convinced that part-time substitute dog walker really counted as a new job, so I fibbed a little. "I'm going to be personal assistant." That was sort of true. I was going to personally assist a dog.

"Who for? Anyone I know?"

"No. He's an artist." I didn't even know this artist's name. Oh, well. It was all a big lie anyway, so I kept right on talking. "His name is Wally."

"Wally who?"

"Just Wally. He's an eccentric. He only uses one name." I congratulated myself on my fast thinking. Fortunately, Mike doesn't know any artists or anything about art, so I was pretty safe from any more questioning.

"Well, be careful."

"What do you mean, 'be careful'?"

"You know what artists are like."

I didn't. I don't think Mike did either, but this too-little-too-late jealousy got me a tad riled up.

"He is very attractive," I said.

I should have said "Wally" was hot or sexy or something. Calling a man attractive made me sound like my mother. Not that any of the "attractive" men she introduces me to ever do turn out to be hot or sexy or anything like that—unless you count the size of their stock portfolios. Money seems to be my mother's main criteria in assessing potential husbands for me. Since I disappointed them by dropping out of college, my parents have become convinced that I will never make it on my own. My sister is an MD and my brother is a financial analyst, so my parents get to focus all their anxiety on me. They worry about my future. I worry about my future, too, but for entirely different reasons.

But back to Wally. My mother would have a million fits if I ever brought home an eccentric artist who went by only one name. Me? Hot is not a big priority for me. Money certainly isn't. I'd be happy with nice. I mean truly nice. Not just pretending-until-your-girlfriend-wants-a-commitment nice.

"Where did you meet this Wally guy?" Mike interrupted my thoughts.

"I met him in the park," I said.

"The park? When? He sounds like a weirdo."



"Oh, I ran into him a while back, and we got to talking. He's not at all weird." I wasn't counting on this artist guy not being weird, but it didn't matter much to me, one way or the other. Just as long as the Great Dane Wally didn't bite.

"You never mentioned any Wally to me."

"Didn't I?" I tried to sound glacial. I must have succeeded.

"Look," Mike said. "Let's not fight. I want us to be friends. How about dinner this evening? I need to give you your jacket back, and there are a few things you left at my apartment. How about seven?"

"I'm busy," I said. "Drop them in the mail."

**The next morning**, I got up early and picked out a dog walking outfit. I wanted to look like a serious professional. The problem was that I didn't know what a serious professional dog walker was supposed to look like, so, instead, I tried to replicate Barbara's look. Unfortunately, Barbara is in her early 60's, and I'm twenty-eight. We don't exactly have the same wardrobe options. I finally settled on jeans and sneakers and a sweatshirt—and skipped putting on makeup. I didn't want Wally's master thinking I was one of those unserious woman who are always worrying about what they look like.

I got to Wally's address early. Too early. It was only two blocks from my building, which was very convenient. I might have walked only two blocks to get there, but it was a whole different neighborhood. Nicer. Much nicer. I have a tiny studio which I pay an obscene amount of rent for. Wally's block contained nothing but townhouses. I tried not to think what it cost to live in those places.

I loitered around the front of the house across the street until precisely two minutes until nine, and then strode purposefully across the street as if I'd just walked sixteen blocks at a fast clip, barely making it on time. I marched right up to the door and rang the bell.

Nothing happened. I couldn't hear the bell ringing. No one came to the door. Inside I could hear the baying of a dog. I knew Great Danes were supposed to be big, but this one—if his bark was anything to judge by—must be enormous.

I pressed the bell again. Still nothing. I knocked on the door. Gently. Nothing. I knocked louder. Nothing. I made a fist and prepared to bang on the door.

Suddenly, the door was flung open. I stood there on the doorstep—fist upraised—and stared.

Standing in the doorway was the shortest grown man I'd ever seen. He wasn't a midget or a dwarf or anything, but I'm under five feet tall, and we stood there eye to eye. His eyes were the exact color of a winter sky, just before it starts to snow.

"You must be the dog walker," he said and tugged at his goatee. I've never been one for facial hair, but it looked pretty good on him.

"I'm Cynthia," I said and stuck out my hand.

He didn't take it, and when I looked down I realized why. His hands were flecked with paint. In fact, every part of him was flecked with paint. He even had paint in his hair and there was a streak of blue now, in his goatee, where he reached up to tug at it.

"I'm Lawrence," he said and motioned me in off the doorstep. "You'd better come in and meet Wally."

Wally was every bit as big as he sounded. He was also extremely excited to be going out. Lawrence put the leash on for me. I wondered what had possessed such a small man to choose such a big dog.

"He really likes to go down to the park and play fetch, but that had better wait until a day I can go with you, and make sure he'll come back when you call him."

I wasn't at all sure I was ready for this. I was already having visions of Wally, loose and drunk with freedom, barreling down the streets of New York City knocking down old ladies, overturning strollers, trampling—

"You're new at this, aren't you?" Lawrence asked as I struggled to reign in Wally as we headed to toward the door.



"Didn't Barbara tell you?"

"Yes." Lawrence grinned.

*Well, then why ask?* Was he just rubbing it in?

"I'll be fine," I said.

"I'm sure you will." Lawrence didn't look at all sure, but he smiled at me, anyway. "Just show him who's boss and everything will be OK."

I must have looked very unsure of myself, because abruptly Lawrence changed his mind. "Maybe I'd better go with you today. Just in case."

*In case of what?* I couldn't expect to get paid if the owner had to go along with me to supervise me while I supervised the dog. This was turning into a complete disaster. Why couldn't my first canine client have been a sweet-tempered and elderly tea-cup poodle, or an overweight Shih Tzu that had to be coaxed around the block?

Lawrence headed out the door, and I followed. Or, to be completely accurate, Lawrence headed out the door, Wally bounded after him, and I was dragged along behind.

We got out on the street, and Lawrence took the leash from my hand. Wally calmed right down. Lawrence told him to heel. Wally heeled. At least he heeled until he caught sight of a cat in a window, and then he got all worked up again. Lawrence made him sit, and when we started off again, Wally was docile.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

"We have an understanding. Wally has been with me since he was a puppy."

It was hard for me to imagine Wally as a puppy.

"How old is Wally?" I asked. What I was really interested in was Lawrence's age. He seemed younger than me, but I couldn't figure out how much younger. I wondered if him being so short made him seem younger than he really was.

"Wally is five years old," Lawrence said. "I got him the year after I graduate with my MFA."

I was not impressed. The men my mother introduces me to always want to tell me about their advanced degrees right off the bat.

Too bad. I had been warming to Lawrence. The whole MFA thing stopped me cold. It didn't matter, anyway. I didn't have to warm to him, just his dog. In fact it was better that I didn't like Lawrence. I was supposed to be getting over my breakup, not noticing what a nice smile—

"Your turn," said Lawrence and thrust the leash into my hand. "Say, 'Wally! Heel!' in a firm voice."

I said it. I don't know if my voice was firm, but it was loud. Wally heeled.

"Good job!" Lawrence said. I'm not sure if he was praising me or praising Wally.

We walked all the way to a little park, eight blocks away, and Lawrence let Wally off his leash. He took a ball out of his pocket and tossed it. Wally brought it right back.

Lawrence handed the ball to me. "Playing fetch is Wally's all-time favorite thing to do."

I threw the ball a few times. Wally went right for it every time, brought it back, and dropped it at my feet.

"Now for the moment of truth," Lawrence said. He was looking right at me. He had a way of maintaining eye contact a nanosecond longer than I was strictly comfortable with. I wondered if was that way with everyone, or if it was just me. I doubted it. I tried to stop thinking about how much I wished that I'd taken the time to put on makeup. I don't know what I'd been imagining that Great-Dane-owning artists were like, but I hadn't been imagining a very cute, very short, mostly nice, but a little pretentious man close to my own age.

I realized that he was waiting for some sort of reply from me so I asked, "What moment of truth?"

"Call Wally back."

"What do I say?"



Lawrence looked amused at my complete lack of dog knowledge. At least he confined himself to thinly veiled amusement and didn't laugh to my face. "I usually just say, 'Wally, Come!'"

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then you go and get him."

"What if he runs away?"

"Then you have a problem."

"Oh," I said. *I'm never letting this dog off his leash, I don't care what Lawrence says.*

"Just try it."

"Wally, come!" I yelled.

It was a miracle. Wally came.

"He likes you," Lawrence said. He clipped Wally's leash back to his collar and handed him off to me.

"Wally's not the only one—" Lawrence continued, "—I like you, too. A lot."

I think I spluttered a bit, but no actual words came out. These artists are not like normal people, apparently. They come straight to the point. He liked me? Maybe he just meant that he liked me on the professional level. That seemed highly unlikely. I was completely incompetent.

We started walking back toward Lawrence's townhouse. I figured he would leave it at that—whatever that was—but he didn't. "I mean it," he said. "I can tell, right away, who I'm going to fall hard for."

*He's probably one of these guys who falls madly in love with Woman A as soon as he lays eyes on her, and then, by the next Tuesday, he's forgotten all about Woman A and claims to be madly in love with Woman B.*

"I know this is a very personal question—" I said, "—but how many women have you fallen for in the last year?"

"Not one."

"How about the last three years?"

"New women?"

I didn't really understand where he was going with that, but I had to say something, so I said, "Sure, why not? New women."

"Zero."

"OK," I said. "I'll ask the question another way: How many women have you fallen in love with, total?"

"Two," Lawrence said. "Not counting you."

*This guy is a first class player. I've met his type before. Lying little weasels, all of them.*

"So what do you think?" Lawrence asked.

"Wally's a great dog."

"I wasn't asking what you thought of Wally."

"What were you asking?"

"You and me. What do you think?"

This guy was too much. Did women fall for lines like that? Actually, they did. I had, more than once, with other lying little weasels. But I didn't fall for lines like that anymore.

"There is no you and me," I said and then added—so as not to alienate my only confirmed client—"I'm just coming out of a long-term relationship. I broke up yesterday, to be exact. I'm not really looking right now."

Lawrence looked genuinely chastened. I seemed he'd failed to detect the rays of sadness radiating from me. Maybe he'd assumed I was just naturally gloomy or clinically depressed. "I'm sorry to hear that," Lawrence said. "Breaking up is brutal."

It was brutal. Although, to be honest, I hadn't thought more than once or twice about Mike ever since Lawrence had opened his front door.



"It's probably for the best," I said. That's what people always say about terrible things that happen over which they have no control.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm not sure I subscribe to the old 'it's all for the best' theory," Lawrence said.

That was OK. I don't really subscribe to it either, but it's something to say when nothing else seems appropriate.

"Do you love him?" Lawrence asked. "Your exe, I mean—"

That was way too personal. I wasn't going to answer that. I couldn't answer that. Only yesterday I'd been sure that I loved Mike, now I wasn't convinced.

"I'd rather not talk about it," I said.

"Fair enough," Lawrence said. Then he brightened up. "So we can't be lovers. We'll be friends, then."

*Will we? Friends?* I wasn't at all sure about that.

"I think I just really need to be alone for a while," I said. This was going to be very awkward, if this guy wouldn't take no for an answer, and I had to continue to see him. Every. Single. Day.

**As it turned out**, I didn't see Lawrence again for almost a month. He lived with his sister and her husband, apparently, and even though I came to pick up Wally at nine, Monday through Saturday, rain or shine, it was always Dianna or Chance who met me at the door. Wally was always leashed and ready to go, and there was never any need to come inside.

The longer I went without seeing Lawrence the more curious I grew until at last I gave into temptation and did a little internet stalking—I mean research. I was shocked at what I discovered. Lawrence was a big deal. I mean a really big deal. He was famous. Lawrence was as famous as an artist can be, which, admittedly, is a totally different kind of famous than, say, being a rock star. Still. When I saw the prices some of his paintings went for I aspired my orange juice. This was a guy I could bring home, and my mother would welcome him with open arms.

Molly, who was over watching TV, jumped up and pounded me on the back.

"Who's that?" she asked, pointing to Lawrence's bio picture.

This was embarrassing. Molly had been engrossed in her show up until I started choking. I hadn't yet breathed a word to her about Lawrence. I wasn't sure why. I usually tell her everything.

"Oh, he's just a client of mine," I said.

"So, how many clients does that make?"

It made three. Not counting the fact that I had started walking all of Barbara's dogs since her daughter had given birth to twins. That wouldn't last forever, though. Just until the end of the month, then Barbara would start taking back her clients.

"He's pretty cute," Molly said. "Nice eyes."

"He's very short."

"So? You are too. What's he like?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I've only met him once."

"How was that?"

"I'm not sure. It was the first time I'd met him, and he claimed it was love at first sight. I haven't seen him since."

"He sounds like a loony."

"He might be." I wasn't sure, though. In my digging, I'd discovered that Lawrence had been in a seven year relationship with who appeared to be his high-school sweetheart. They must have broken up at some point in the not-so-distant past, though. The most recent photographs of them together were from a gallery opening last fall. Unless, of course, they were still together, and Lawrence was a two-timing lying little weasel. Given my track record, two-timing lying little weasel was a distinct possibility.



I had thought that perhaps Lawrence had been gone all this time—out of the country or something—but the very next day he resurfaced.

When I went to collect Wally for his morning walk, Lawrence's sister Dianna met me at the door. She looked very amused, and I could see why. Wally had a huge red bow tied around his neck. Attached to bow was an envelope.

"You'd better read that note after you get out of sight," Dianna said. "If you don't want to be observed, that is."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I couldn't say, exactly," Dianna said. "I wasn't allowed to read it. I will say that my brother is a little odd and extremely determined, once he sets his mind to anything—or anyone."

My heart beat a little faster all the way to the park. Everyone who passed us smiled. Who can resist smiling at a galumphing Great Dane with a giant bow around his neck? A block from the park, I took the bow off his neck. I didn't want the other dogs laughing at him. After all, he has an image to maintain.

I didn't open the envelope until I'd let Wally off his leash. My hands were shaking as I opened it. Inside was a single sheet of paper. It said:

### ***Are you over him, yet?***

Was I? It felt like it. It was a loaded question, though, and there was no doubt about who was asking it.

I didn't have a pen, but a lady sitting on the next bench loaned me one. I hesitated. I knew if I said, "Yes," I wouldn't just be answering the question of whether or not I was over Mike.

Wally, contrary to his usual habit, hung around while I debated with myself. Maybe he knew what was at stake somehow, or maybe he was just slightly traumatized from his seven block trek with a big red bow around his neck. His masculine pride must have been a bit dented.

I finally made up my mind. I wrote my answer, returned the pen, and put Wally back on his leash. A block from Lawrence's, I reattached the bow and the envelope.

When I rang the bell, Chance answered.

"Well?" he said.

"Well, what?"

He just raised one eyebrow at me and took Wally's leash. I turned around and left in a hurry.

The next morning, Wally wasn't wearing a bow, but there was another envelope on his collar.

This time there was no note. I shook the envelope. A theater ticket fell out. The ticket was for that evening. I put it in my pocket. I didn't know what to do. I hadn't decided whether or not I was ready to start seeing Lawrence, and that was definitely where this was all leading.

When I left Wally with Dianna she said, "See you this evening," as if they were all going, and she just assumed I was going to show up.

Her assumption was correct. I couldn't resist going. I was too curious not to.

When I got to the theater, the place was packed. I found my seat. Dianna and Chance were there, sitting two rows behind me, but the seat beside me was empty, and remained empty right up until the curtain was about to go up.

"Sorry about that," Lawrence said as he slipped into the seat beside me. "There was a last minute crisis with the scenery. You know how opening nights are."

I didn't. I wished I'd tried to find something about the play, but I'd been busy walking dogs all day, and it had been all I could do to find time to take a shower and dig up something presentable to wear.

"You look great!" Lawrence said. I'm pretty sure he couldn't even see me, but I mumbled, "Thanks," anyway. I've never been great at graciously accepting compliments, even when they are deserved, and



this one wasn't. It takes more than a quick shower and ten minutes in front of the mirror to catapult me into the "looking great" category.

The play turned out to be some sort of avant garde musical. At least it seemed avant garde to me. Later, after I made it back home, I would discover that I had been sitting in a \$500 seat and opening night had been sold out for months. I'm afraid it was wasted on me, though.

I couldn't concentrate on what was going on, because, every three and a half minutes Lawrence would lean in to make some comment about something, and his warm breath would fan my neck. I was pretty sure I was roughly the same color as the red velvet curtains up on the stage.

At half-time—or intermission or whatever it's called when everyone takes a potty break in the middle of the production—Lawrence took me out to the bar in the lobby and went to get us drinks. He didn't get far before he was mobbed. I just stood there, taking it all in. I felt virtually invisible until Lawrence managed to work his way back to me and brought the mob with him.

Everyone was congratulating him on the set design—that was his role in the whole shebang, apparently—and even I could see what everyone was raving about. The actors were good, the music was good, but the set was brilliant.

I just stood there beside him and listened to everyone tell him how wonderful he was and watched women flirt with him. For a while I was impressed, and then I started getting a little irked. What kind of a first date was this? It seemed a little show-offy to me.

"I really have to go," I said, as soon as I managed to wrestle his attention away from a statuesque blond woman who looked one of those heiresses dripping with diamonds you see on soap operas—not that I watch soap operas or anything. She was very tall, and Lawrence was very short, but that didn't seem to be handicapping him any. The woman was practically crawling into his suit with him.

"I have to get up really early in the morning," I said. "I have an early appointment with a couple of Pomeranians."

Lawrence put his arm around my waist. "Don't go," he said. "It's only half over, and then there's a party afterwards."

I'm not big on parties to begin with, and I had nothing in common with anyone here.

"Introduce us," the statuesque blond said to Lawrence.

Now that Lawrence had his arm around me, I was suddenly no longer invisible.

Lawrence introduced me to everyone standing around. It was a very weird experience. Everyone was looking at me. I wanted to be home.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really do have to go." Then I wriggled out of Lawrence's grasp, pushed my way through the crowd, and caught a taxi home.

As soon as I shut my apartment door behind me and kicked off my shoes, I felt bad about leaving in the middle of the performance. I shouldn't have done that. Lawrence had obviously wanted me there.

I had his phone number—I kept all my client's numbers—and I almost called it. I ended up sending a text instead. The performance probably wasn't even over yet and no doubt his phone was switched off.

Very sorry. Social phobia. My apologies.

I figured that was it. I'd probably never hear from the guy again. At least not on a personal basis. If I was really lucky, he might not fire me from walking Wally, but I wasn't counting on it.

I really did have an appointment with a couple of Pomeranians at six-thirty in the morning, so I put on my pajamas and brushed my teeth and got into bed to read. I was just getting into my story when my intercom buzzed.

It was Lawrence. He was downstairs. Could he come up?

"Right now?" I asked.



"Yes."

"What about your party?"

"I didn't go."

Now I felt really bad. I felt so bad, I let him come up.

After I let him in, he sat down on my couch. He stared around. My apartment's all one room.

There's not much to see.

"How did you know where I live?" I asked.

"Dianna told me."

That must be true. I remembered telling Dianna the name of my building.

"Sorry about tonight," Lawrence said. He looked remarkably cheerful for a man who was missing out on the party of the year and had had his date abandon him in the middle of the evening.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," I said.

"I do. I was really excited about this evening, and I thought you'd enjoy it. The problem is, I hardly know you—"

That was an understatement.

"What do you like to do?" Lawrence asked. "Let's do that, next time."

There was going to be a next time? This guy was a glutton for punishment.

"There's still time to make it to your party," I said.

He looked hurt. That made me feel even worse. I was starting to believe he was being sincere when he'd claimed that he really liked me.

"I'm not trying to kick you out or anything, it's just that—"

"I'm hungry," Lawrence said. "I didn't get any supper. Let's order Chinese."

So that's what we did. We sat on my couch and watched a late night talk show while we ate Tangerine Chicken from cardboard containers.

When all the Chicken was gone, Lawrence muted the TV and handed me a fortune cookie.

"You first," he said.

I cracked mine open and took out the tiny slip of white paper. I read it once. I read it twice.

"Aren't you going to tell me what it says?" Lawrence asked.

"It says: 'The love of your life will come complete with a dog'."

Lawrence just smiled at me.

"How did you do that?" I said. "You made that fortune. You must have."

"I did," Lawrence said. "For our second date I was going to take you out for Chinese."

Then he kissed me on the forehead and left me sitting there surrounded by takeout containers and misgivings about men who claim to fall in love at first sight.

**The next morning**, after I was done walking the Pomeranians, I headed home for breakfast. When I got to the lobby there was a note taped to my mailbox.

*How about tonight?*

That was it. No signature. No "call me." No "meet me at—" I didn't know what to make of it.

When I went to collect Wally after breakfast, Lawrence cleared up the mystery himself.

"So—" He said as I took Wally's leash.

"So—what?"

"What about tonight?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know—you choose."



This was new. I was tempted to suggest that we go for matching manicures—just to see his expression—but I lost my nerve.

"I haven't been to the planetarium for a while," I said. I love going to the planetarium. Mike went with me once. He complained the whole time about how bored he was. I haven't been back since. Going back alone was just too depressing.

"Then, the planetarium it is."

"They close at five," I said. "We'll need to be there by four." I'd be done with my dogs by then. Barely.

Lawrence was waiting when I arrived. I was perspiring, smelled of Collie and was covered in Mastiff drool.

"What made you decide to become a dog walker?" Lawrence asked as we sat in the darkened Planetarium and watched the stars moving majestically overhead.

"My exe."

"Dog walking was his idea?"

"No. My exe was my boss. I couldn't face going back."

"I can see why. I broke up, too, not that long ago."

"When?"

"Last fall."

I had suspected as much.

"How long had you been together?"

"Ten years."

*Ten years? How old is this guy, anyway?*

"We met when we were juniors in high school."

I did the math. That made him twenty-seven. Give or take. Pretty young to be so successful. It was my fate, it seemed, to be surrounded by overachievers.

"Wow!" I said. "That's even longer than you and Wally have been together."

"Yeah."

"What happened?" It was a nosey question, but I asked it anyway.

"I wanted to get married. She didn't."

*No kidding?*

"Me, too."

"You want to get married?"

*Geez Louise!* And I'd thought asking why Lawrence and his girlfriend had broken up was a nosey question.

"I wanted to get married to the guy I was seeing." And the six who came before him. Maybe I needed to get a lot more picky about who I wanted to marry.

"What about now?"

*Seriously?*

"I think you need to be together for at least a year before you start thinking about getting married," I said. That was sort of a lie. Typically, I started thinking about getting married six months in. That was usually marked the beginning of the end. This was turning into a very weird conversation to be having with someone I'd spent the grand total of 7 hours with.

"I think six months is enough time," Lawrence said.

"And you're basing that on what?" I asked. "I mean, you just admitted that you've been with the same woman since you were seventeen."

"Outside observation."

"Who have you been observing?"



I never did get an answer. A disembodied voice came over the sound system informing us that it was closing time. We stumbled out into the sunshine. I squinted against the light.

"You hungry?" Lawrence asked.

We ended up eating sandwiches at a deli counter.

"You really believe in the six-month thing?" I said.

"Absolutely. If we're still seeing each other six months from now, I'll propose. I promise."

He was laughing when he said it, but I felt like I might fall off my stool.

"I wasn't aware we were seeing each other," I said.

"Then what is this?"

"Two friends having a sandwich."

"Have it your way," Lawrence said. "As far as I'm concerned, though, the clock started ticking yesterday."

As we left the deli, we were interrupted by a most unlikely interloper.

"Cynthia? I thought that was you."

It was Mike, and he wasn't alone. Madeleine, who used to work two cubicles over from me was clinging to his arm in a very possessive manner. How long had that been going on? Had he started up with her before he finished with me? Was she who he had been texting during his break-up speech—giving her a play-by-play? Probably. How humiliating.

"Hello, Mike," I said. I glared at Madeleine. I couldn't help it.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Mike asked. He was transparently curious about Lawrence, who was standing there silently with his hand on the back of my neck. He hadn't touched me all the time we'd been in the planetarium—or the deli—but now that Mike had shown up, it seemed he couldn't keep his hands off of me.

"Uh—" I thought fast, but not fast enough.

Lawrence was just about to do the job for me—he was actually reaching out with his hand, preparatory, I'm sure, to saying, "Hi, I'm Lawrence"—when Mike said, "You must be Wally."

If Lawrence was startled by being addressed by the name of his dog, he didn't let on. Instead he stuck out his hand.

"So—" said Mike. "You two seem to have really hit it off. Cynthia does tend to get very close to the people she works for."

Madeleine was openly smirking. I was the color of an overripe tomato. My overripe tomato impersonation was 10% embarrassment and 90% anger. My discomfort was not lost on Lawrence. He looked pretty mad, too. At first I thought he was mad at me. It was pretty transparent that I'd told a lie somewhere along the line, although he'd have had a hard time piecing together exactly what I'd lied about. But it turned out he wasn't angry with me at all. Evidently, he didn't object to a white lie for a good cause any more than I did, because before I saw it coming, he said, "Cynthia and I **have** gotten very close. In fact, just today we were discussing getting married."

We had been discussing getting married. Just not to each other. The look on Mike's face was priceless. I could have kissed Lawrence right there and then. Apparently, he's a bit of a mind reader because he took this opportunity to plant a kiss on the side of my head.

"Does your mother know about this?" Mike asked.

"Know about what?" I asked. That made me nervous, Mike talking about my mother.

My mother liked Mike better than any of the other men I've dated. In fact, when I'd called my mother to tell her that Mike and I had broken up, she'd gotten almost as upset about it as I had, initially. I'd waited a whole week before I worked up the courage to break the news to her. Instead of offering me sympathy and support, my mother had said that Mike was the best thing that had ever happened to me and I should do whatever it took to get him back.

"Does your mother know you're engaged?" Mike asked, jerking me back to the present.



I just stared at Mike. How had he made the leap to me being officially engaged? Never mind. I'd just go with it.

"Oh, yes. She couldn't be more happy!"

"Really?" Mike was looking Lawrence up and down. He seemed to find him wanting.

Madeleine, who had been standing silently by, was clearly disturbed by the interest Mike was taking in my love life. "I suppose you'll both be at the wedding," Mike said.

"Oh, yes. Wouldn't miss it for the world," Lawrence said. Clearly he was subscribing to my just-go-with-it philosophy.

"I guess we'll see you there, then," Mike said.

*We? See you there?*

"You're really still planning on going?" I couldn't believe it. Of course he'd been invited, back before we broke up. He'd been expected to show up, but in the capacity of boy-friend to the sister of the bride. Why would he want to go, now?

"Your mother called me up and insisted that I come," Mike said. "She was even so kind as to suggest I bring a date along."

*My conniving mother!* She was hoping that by getting Mike to come to the wedding she could orchestrate a reunion between us. Mike was probably going just for the networking opportunities. Put my family's friends together with the groom's family's friends, and Mike would have made half a million dollars' worth of new contacts by the end of the weekend. It's a credit to Madeleine's charms that he didn't wait until after the wedding to break up with me. Not that he was going to end up missing out on anything, as it turned out.

"So, am I invited to the wedding?" Lawrence asked, as soon as Mike and Madeleine were out of earshot. "By the way, who's getting married?"

"My sister. I'm the maid-of-honor, and no, you are not invited."

"Too bad."

"Thanks, though," I said. "You know—for shocking him like that."

Lawrence just shrugged. "What did you see in that guy?"

It was my turn to shrug. To be honest, I was having a hard time remembering.

**Less than 24 hours later**, I had to rescind my prohibition on Lawrence coming to the wedding.

My mother called the next morning, while I was out with the Pomeranians. She got straight to the point. "Mike called us last night," she said. "What's this about you being engaged to some artist you met in the park?"

"Oh, that—we were just messing with Mike. Mike misunderstood something that was said—"

"Who's we. You mean this Wally person?"

Explaining that Wally was actually a dog seemed like too much trouble. It would only lead to further confusion—and make me look like I was turning into a pathological liar—so I didn't bother to correct her.

"Yes."

"Why would you do that?"

"I don't know. Revenge?"

"But you're dating this Wally?"

*Was I? I suppose. Sort of. Maybe.*

"Yes."

"Mike thought he was weird."

"He's not weird." If anyone in this picture was weird, it was Mike. What did he think he was doing tattling on me to my mother? What were we? Six-year-olds?



"Well, your father and I would like to meet Wally. Bring him to the wedding."

"We really haven't been together that long. I don't think he'll want to come to a family wedding."

Except that he did. When I told Lawrence about my conversation with my mother, he seemed totally fine with it.

"You really don't have to," I said.

"No. It'll be interesting."

"By the way, everyone thinks your name is Wally."

Lawrence just looked at me.

"Please don't ask me how they came to that conclusion," I said.

He just smiled.

**Just three days later**, before I'd even had a chance to see Lawrence again to get any sense of where all this was going, tragedy struck. Wally got loose while I was walking him. Technically he was already loose. We were at the park. I was playing fetch with him, and then a fire engine went by, lights flashing and sirens blaring, and Wally went berserk.

He ran down the street after the fire engine. I ran after him, but I'm no match for a Great Dane, and I lost sight of him after two blocks.

I called Lawrence from right there on the street corner, but he didn't pick up, so I called his sister.

Dianne sounded worried. Lawrence was out for the day, but she'd get the car out and pick me up, and we'd try to track Wally down that way.

We finally found him down a side-street twelve blocks from where I'd lost sight of him. He'd been hit. He wasn't dead, but he didn't look good. He was scrapped and trembling, and he couldn't stand up. Dianna and I managed to get him loaded into the car. I was afraid of hurting him more, but, as Diana pointed out, there are no doggie ambulances. We'd just have to do the best we could, she said.

We got Wally to the vet's. I stayed outside in the waiting room. I was a mess. I think I'd been crying the whole time, but it wasn't until I was sitting there in a corner pretending to read a year-old copy of *The Journal of Feline Medicine*, that I finally realized it.

I pulled myself together enough to call my clients and cancel my appointments for the rest of the day. I didn't tell them why. I couldn't. I was the worst dog walker. Ever.

*Please don't let Wally die? Please don't make Lawrence have to put him to sleep?*

Dianna came out after a while. She was looking less grim.

"The vet thinks Wally will make it. They'll keep him here overnight. He has cracked ribs, and the vet thinks there may be some internal injuries. Only time will tell, though. They have him sedated."

"Have you called Lawrence?" I asked.

"I thought you might want to."

I didn't want to, but I did it anyway. It was the hardest phone call I've ever had to make.

Lawrence didn't seem mad, but it was such a shock that the anger might come later. He was two hours away, he said. He'd get back as soon as possible. Then he hung up.

*Please don't let Lawrence come back to a dead dog?*

Wally didn't die. He had to be kept immobile for a week, and then after that he was on regular meds for a while. He couldn't be left alone. He was sleeping on the floor in Lawrence's room at night and on the floor of Lawrence's studio during the day while his master was working.

I found all this out from Diana. I didn't hear a peep out of Lawrence.

*This is it. A promising relationship nipped in the bud before it ever really got off the ground.* And I thought my old average of a one relationship per year was bad.

The weekend of Ann's wedding rolled around. I didn't know what I was going to say when I arrived alone. I guess I'd say that "Wally" and I had broken up. Two boyfriends gone caput in less than six months. My mother was going to be appalled. Or maybe not. Single, I was more vulnerable to being



talked into getting back together with Mike. Not that Mike had any intention of trying to talk me into any such thing, but my mother would certainly give it her best effort.

I drove upstate to my parents' two days before the ceremony. Ann had wanted me there a week ahead, but I claimed I was too busy. I wasn't. Barbara had taken all of her clients back, and with Wally out of commission, I was down to the Pomeranians. It was just that I wasn't feeling strong enough to handle Ann and her increasingly frequent meltdowns in a manner that wouldn't just make things worse.

I was depressed. I was still sad about Wally. I was sad about losing Lawrence. The only thing I wasn't sad about anymore was Mike. I was feeling lucky to be rid of him.

Ironically, Mike was the first person I saw when I pulled up to the house. He was out at the street, getting into his car. Sans Madeleine.

I waved hello and hurried into the house.

The place was full of people. Ann was already in a state—something about the wedding planner having forgotten to order a groom's cake—and I knew this was only the beginning. There are drawbacks to perfectionism, although—as my mother has pointed out many times—at least my sister is successful. I'd rather be happy instead of successful—if forced to choose one or the other—but I suspect that's yet another thing my mother and I do not see eye-to-eye on.

"Mike actually showed up?" I said, after I'd hugged my mother and spent 10 minutes reassuring Ann that whatever the local bakery could come up with would pass perfectly fine as a groom's cake.

"Of course he did," said my mother. "Mike's so loyal. I didn't expect anything less of him."

I think my mother may be defining loyalty as a stable six-figure job with a deluxe healthcare package and a 401K, but whatever. We all define loyalty differently.

"Where's Madeleine?" I asked. Maybe she wasn't there, yet. It was only Friday and the wedding wasn't until Sunday.

"She's not coming," said Ann. "They broke up."

*Did they really? Interesting.*

"Where's Wally?" My mother asked. "Didn't he come with you?"

I'd meant to tell the truth. I'd meant to say that we'd broken up, too. Only that wasn't really the truth, either. We'd never exactly been together in the first place.

"Something came up," I said. "He might make it up later in the weekend."

He wouldn't, of course, but if I had to tell a lie, it might as well be as convincing as possible.

"That's too bad," my mother said, but she didn't look like she meant it. I could see the wheels turning. She was definitely scheming to get Mike and me back together.

She had little opportunity to do anything about it that evening, though. It was Ann's hen night and the Senator's bachelor party.

Ann has tons of girlfriends. Even with twelve bride's maids slots open she'd still had to make some difficult decisions, and, when we all got ready to go out on the town, I counted 38 of us. That was OK with me. In a crowd that big, I wouldn't be expected to keep the party going. Any party that depends on me is doomed.

Halfway through the evening, when the majority of the group had gotten pretty boisterous—me, myself and I not included—my phone vibrated. I was getting a call. It was Lawrence. I couldn't believe it.

I had to shout over all the noise, and he kept saying, "what," over and over, so it wasn't until I got outside to the parking lot that I found out what he wanted.

"I just called to get directions," he said.

*What? Directions to where?*

"I don't understand," I said.

"I'd like to come to the wedding, if you still want me to."

Did I want him to? I wasn't sure.



"What's going on with us?" I asked. I hadn't heard from him in weeks, and now he was planning to show up at a family wedding.

"I'm sorry I haven't called you. I know you probably thought I was angry with you, and I was for a few days. But after I had time to think about it, I realized that exactly the same thing would have happened if I had been with Wally, instead of you. It was just a case of bad luck," Lawrence said, "And as far as we're concerned, I'd like to start up again where we left off."

That made me feel better. A little.

Lawrence wasn't finished. "After I stopped being mad, then I was embarrassed that I'd gotten angry in the first place and it was touch and go with Wally for a while and—"

I understood. Three days had turned into three weeks and calling up to get directions to the wedding was his way of finding a reason to finally pick up the phone.

"Are you really serious about wanting to come up?" I asked.

"Have you already told your family I'm not coming?"

"Not exactly. I said you might come. I wasn't expecting you to, or anything. I just didn't want to have to come right out and say we'd broken up."

"Have we broken up?"

"Were we ever together?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not really."

"Then can I come?"

I hesitated. But not for long. I really liked this guy. Even if he had gone AWOL on me.

"I suppose."

"Don't be overenthusiastic, now."

"No, I'd really like you to. I mean it."

"Good. I'll be up tomorrow afternoon."

I said goodbye and was about to hang up, when Lawrence added, "By the way, I'll have to bring Wally."

"Uh—"

"That's OK, isn't it? He still has to have meds every six hours, and Dianna and Chance are going away for the weekend and—"

I could hardly say it wasn't OK. After all, I was the reason why Wally was taking meds every six hours in the first place.

"Sure," I said. "We'll figure out something."

Finding a hotel room was out. I knew everything within twenty-miles was already booked. I was sharing a room at my parents' with Ann, so I couldn't exactly just override my mother's scruples—she hadn't even sanctioned Ann and The Senator sharing a room—and let Lawrence bunk with me.

My mother was going to have a thousand fits when I informed her we had to find a bed for my (probably fake) boyfriend **and** his dog.

It turned out that my mother had everything under control—at least she thought she did. She's a meticulous planner. In the off-chance that Lawrence—AKA Wally—ever showed up, she'd left an open bed.

"Wally can share a room with The Senator—there are two beds in that one." That's how she actually refers to him: The Senator. My whole family does. Even Ann.

"He can't," I said.

"Why not?"

"He's bringing his dog. Unless The Senator likes dogs. Then it might be alright."

My mother hit the roof. My mother does not like dogs. She doesn't like anything that barks, drools or sheds, things which Wally does in abundance.



"I know you disagree with Mike's assessment that Wally is a weirdo," my mother said, when she'd regained her composure. "But bringing a dog to a wedding? Don't you think that qualifies?"

"It's not just an eccentric impulse," I protested. "There are extenuating circumstances. His dog is sick."

My mother turned another shade of pale. I think she was envisioning a dog tossing up his cookies—or dog biscuits, in this case—all over The Senator.

"No." My mother was very firm. She had exactly the same look on her face I remember from childhood when I brought home a baby hamster from my friend Amy's house and asked if I could keep it.

"I can't disinvite him," I said. "And I can't tell him not to bring his dog. It's my fault his dog got hit in the first place."

"Hit? I thought you said the dog was sick."

"Injured. Sick. The point is, the dog has to be given medication every six hours and Lawr—I mean Wally can't leave him at a kennel and there's no one else to keep him—"

My mother just threw up her hands. "You figure it out," she said. "And, just to be absolutely clear, you are not putting a dog in with The Senator."

She turned to leave, then thought better of it.

"You do understand, that dog's not going in with **anyone**."

I decided to test the limits of her resolve.

"Can he sleep in the kitchen?"

"Wally or the dog?"

"The dog."

"No."

I don't think she was wild about the idea of a human-being sleeping in the kitchen, but it was crystal clear that dogs were not welcome.

"How about the garage?"

"Absolutely not."

"The potting shed?"

She hesitated. She wanted to say no to that, too, but was afraid it might make her appear unreasonable.

"If you must."

I couldn't put Lawrence and Wally in the potting shed, though. I'd seen inside. There wasn't room for another pair of pruning shears in there, much less a man and his dog.

By the following afternoon, I'd found a solution to the lodging problem. It had come to me when I'd been out in the garage scouting for a pair of heirloom silver candlesticks which were apparently so essential to the whole event that I had to spend hours opening battered cobweb-covered cardboard boxes which looked like they hadn't been touched since 1982. I never did find the candle sticks, but I did find my brother's old scout tent.

I pitched the tent in the backyard, back behind the hedge that obscured the view of the potting shed from the house. I crawled inside. It didn't smell too good, but it was surprisingly roomy.

"What are you doing?" A familiar voice spoke from the other side of the musty canvas. It was Mike. I hadn't seen much of him since I'd arrived, what with spending half of my time carrying out archeological expeditions in spider-infested garages and the other half actively avoiding him.

I stuck my head out of the tent and blew my dusty bangs out of my eyes.

"Setting up a tent," I said, like that was a completely normal thing for a grownup woman to do in the backyard of an upscale suburban home.

"I can see that," Mike said. "But why?"

"It's for Wally. He's going to sleep in it."



"Why?"

I decided to have some fun with this. It might be the only fun I'd have all weekend, so why pass up the opportunity.

"Because I don't want my parents to know he's here," I said.

"Why not? I thought they invited him."

"They did, but now they've asked me to disinvite him."

"Why?"

"They're worried about you."

"Are they worried I'll be jealous?"

"Oh, no," I said, trying to look as grave as possible. "It's not your emotional well-being they are worried about—it's more for your personal safety."

"My personal safety?"

"Yes. Wally has a violent temper."

"But why would he be mad at me?"

I had a sneaking suspicion that the reason that Madeleine and Mike had broken up was pretty much the same reason that Mike and I had broken up. Maybe Madeleine was just a lot smarter than I was and had seen the signs much earlier. Although, she should have known. Any man who cheats on another woman with you is going to cheat on you with another woman. I was also pretty sure that somewhere deep in Mike's underactive conscience he was feeling at least a little bit guilty for having cheated on us both.

"There's a certain type of man that Wally hates. He just can't help it."

"And I'm that type of man?" Mike was looking very confused. "What type of man is that?"

"The type of man—" I paused for effect, "—who can't keep it in his pants."

Crude, I know—but effective. Mike turned almost as pale as my mother had earlier when she was informed that she was going to play hostess to a canine guest.

"You know about that?" Mike asked.

I nodded gravely.

"But how?"

"Everybody knows."

"Everybody?"

"Enough people."

"Do your parents know?"

"They were told, but they're having a hard time processing it."

"Should I leave?"

"Wouldn't that be an admission of guilt?"

Mike didn't answer me.

"I don't think you really have anything to worry about," I said. "Wally claims he has a gun, but I've never actually seen it."

Mike gulped.

"You'd definitely be able to take him in a fight—" I said. "—even if he did have a knife."

Mike was looking pale and paranoid.

"Years of martial arts lessons can hardly compensate for being so short."

"Shouldn't you call the police, or something?"

"And tell them what? That my boyfriend is angry that my ex is a rotten lying little weasel who cheated on me and then made me feel—"

I cut myself off. I hadn't intended to get angry. This had started out as a little practical joke that I hadn't even expected Mike to fall for, and now it was spiraling out of control. I should know better than to lie. Even in jest. It always leads to trouble.



"I really think I should go," Mike said.

"It might be best."

When I peeked out of the front window half an hour later his car was gone.

"Where did Mike go?" I asked my mother.

"He said he was coming down with the flu," she said. "He looked terrible. He was terribly pale and his hands were actually shaking."

"That's too bad."

"It is a shame," my mother said. "Still, it's better that he leave, than risk infecting the whole wedding party."

I'm still not sure what dirt Mike thought I had on him. I mean, he must have known all along that I'd figure out he'd been cheating on me with Madeleine. It must have been something even worse than that. It's probably better that I don't know.

**Lawrence arrived** an hour before the rehearsal dinner. I was waiting out on the curb when he and Wally arrived. Wally looked great. He was limping a little, and he was on the thin side, but other than that, he seemed right as rain.

Wally was very happy to see me. Lawrence was also happy to see me, but, unlike Wally, he restrained himself from jumping up and down and licking me on the cheek.

"I had to get creative with the lodging," I said. "My mother won't stand for dogs in the house."

When I showed him the tent, Lawrence seemed terribly pleased with it.

"I've always wanted one of these old canvas tents," he said.

My parent's backyard is fenced, but Lawrence tied Wally's leash to a fence post anyway. I hated to see him tied up like that, but it was a better alternative than whatever would happen if my mother opened the back door and was greeted enthusiastically by a Great Dane. Having the mother of the bride taken to the hospital to be treated for a heart-attack might put a damper on the festivities.

"Don't forget," I said, as we got out of the car at the restaurant. "Your name is Wally."

Lawrence gave me a funny look, but all he said was, "What if I see someone I know?"

I hadn't thought of that. I thought back to the night at the theater. Lawrence had been such a center of attention. There was a good chance—in this crowd—of someone recognizing him. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to expect that one of the wedding guests owned some of Lawrence's work.

"I'll continue to refer to you as Wally," I said. "And if somebody questions it, you can say it's just a nickname."

"And how will you explain to your family that you've been calling me by my dog's name?"

"Uh—for the duration of your stay, Wally will be rechristened as Fido."

"Fido?"

"OK. That's not very original—Duke, then."

"I don't think Wally will answer to Duke."

"Why should he have to answer to anything?"

We were inside the restaurant now, so Lawrence let the subject drop.

We managed to get seated without me having to introduce Lawrence to anyone. I don't know how it happened, but we ended up sitting across from the happy couple.

The Senator didn't even give me a chance to make introductions.

"Lawrence Howerton!" The Senator exclaimed and stood up to shake Lawrence's hand. The Senator doesn't even stand up for my father. This was an interesting development. I could see my mother, out of the corner of my eye, perking up and taking an interest.

"I own six of your pieces," The Senator said. "I've always wanted to meet you. What a pleasant surprise. No one told me I was marrying into a family that included such an accomplished artist."



The man was practically groveling. If this was a sample of the sort of flagrant flattery he could dish out, it was no wonder he was starting his third term in office. The thing was, I wasn't sure it was flagrant flattery. He appeared genuinely ecstatic to meet Lawrence.

"I thought your name was Wally," Ann said.

"Childhood nickname," Wally said.

"But Cynthia said—"

I kicked Ann under that table. I'd mean to gently tap her on the shin, but I miscalculated.

She yelped, but it shut her up. I was glad she hadn't gone with a ballerina length wedding gown. She was definitely going to wake up with a bruise in the morning.

The Senator didn't even register his yelping fiancée. He was already off on a discussion of nuance and texture and something about tensile shading. Most of it went right over my head, but Lawrence seemed to understand whatever it was The Senator was going on about.

After the dinner was over, my mother caught me in the ladies room.

"Where did you end up putting Wally?" she asked.

"In a tent, out by the potting shed."

I think she thought I was joking. When she found out I wasn't, she was horrified.

"You can't expect a famous artist to sleep in a tent. From what I gather, he's practically a celebrity."

I was tempted to point out that before she witnessed The Senator fawning all over him, she'd begrudged him a spot on the kitchen floor, but I didn't.

"He doesn't mind," I said. "He's seen the tent. He likes it."

When we all got back to the house, my mother insisted on going out to see for herself.

"No—" she said, shaking her head at the tent as I directed the flashlight at it. "This won't do. What about snakes?"

Lawrence said he wasn't worried about snakes.

"You'll share a room with The Senator," she said.

But Lawrence insisted that he was fine. He wouldn't hear of disturbing The Senator. He'd already let Wally into the tent, and the dog was curled up looking as docile and angelic as it's possible for a Great Dane to look on short notice. I'd brought out every spare piece of bedding I could find in the house, and the inside of the tent had taken on a distinct Princess and the Pea effect.

At last, Lawrence managed to convince my mother that he really was fine, and she retreated back to the house. Lawrence nudged Wally over so he wasn't occupying the exact geometric center of the tent and crawled in.

"Well," I said, "Goodnight, I guess. Unless I can get you something else."

"Where are you going?"

"To bed."

"I'm sharing a tent with a dog, and you're leaving me to go inside and sleep in a bed."

"I thought you liked the tent?"

"I do. I'd just like it even better if you were in it with me."

When he put it like that, how could I leave?

**We didn't get much sleep** that night. For a while we just lay there and talked. There was a pause in the conversation, and I felt Lawrence's whiskers brushing my cheek. Then I felt his lips on mine. The sounds of the chirping crickets faded away. I forgot about having to put on a mauve dress the next morning and walk down the aisle with The Senator's brother from Ft. Lauderdale. I forgot about what a disappointment I was to my parents. I forgot about Mike. All that remained of the world and its woes was the tent, and Lawrence and I inside of it. Things got a lot more heated from there. Let's just say that if Ann and The Senator had half as much fun on their wedding night, then the honeymoon was a smashing success.



Sometime very early in the morning, as we lay with our heads out of the tent, looking up at the stars, Wally whiffling softly to himself in the background, Lawrence said, "You know what I'm looking forward to?" I didn't answer. He reached out and traced my cheek with his fingertips. "I'm looking forward to four months and three days from now when I ask you to be my wife."



## Autumn

**Everything happened** just as Lawrence had predicted it would. When he had first declared that he'd propose to me someday, we'd spent barely any time together. By the time he actually got around to popping the big question, though, we were practically inseparable. I learned all about art. He ingratiated himself with my family, which turned out to be an easy task. It grew even easier when they came to visit and got a look at the where Lawrence lived. I didn't bother to tell them that the place actually belonged to Chance and Diane.

A townhouse came up for sale a few doors down from Chance and Diane's, and Lawrence bought it. We started renovating it together before we even got engaged, and, by the time the wedding rolled around, it was ready to move into.

We decided on an autumn wedding. Something simple. No twelve brides' maids. No big poufy white dress. No lavish reception. My mother was less than enthusiastic.

"But we have the money," she said. "Even if Lawrence doesn't want to spend his money on a big wedding, why can't we? The bride's family usually pays, anyway. Its tradition."

I'd tried to dispel the notion that it was about Lawrence being a cheapskate. It wasn't. My mother never brought up the notion that my personal finances came into it. I had no personal finances to speak of. At least not by her standards. I did, however, finally have a full roster of clients, all of which Barbara had agreed to walk for me while Lawrence and I were away on our honeymoon. We were going to Italy. I'd never been. Lawrence promised I'd love it. I believed him.

Unfortunately, the worst was yet to come, vis-à-vis my mother and our wedding plans. I waited as long as I could to reveal that Wally—AKA Duke—would be a member of the wedding party.

"You're having a **dog** in your wedding?"

Wally was going to be the ring bearer. He'd walk up the aisle with a big red bow and the rings tied to his collar. It seemed appropriate, given that he was the only reason Lawrence and I had met in the place.

"You can't do that!" protested my mother. "I mean, a well-behaved Pekinese, maybe, but only because it's an outdoor wedding."

My poor mother. I might be marrying well, but I wasn't marrying right.

It might have been the wrong wedding for my mother, but it was the right wedding for us. We had it in the woods, on one of those fall days where the sky is perfectly blue.

I watched the backs of Molly and Ann as they walked up the aisle of leaves between the rows of chairs. Chance and Dianne were already up front standing beside Lawrence who—just like me—couldn't seem to stop smiling.

Then the harpist started playing, and I took my father's arm and walked up the aisle toward the man I'd spend the rest of my life with.

I don't remember anything the officiant said. I couldn't even recite the vows I wrote, if you asked me now, or remember most of what Lawrence said in his, but one line in particular will stay etched in my memory until the day I die.

*I knew the day I met you—*

I certainly hadn't known. But Lawrence had. I'd spent years trying desperately to convince one man after another to love me, when all the time there was a man out there—just waiting—who needed no convincing at all.

The End







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